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**Virtual social network-mediated English language learning in a Saudi tertiary
EFL context: Innovation and agency**

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
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Abstract

The study explores the nature and roles of virtual social network (VSN) within a Saudi tertiary EFL (English as a foreign language) context, and the trajectory of the students' experiences and perceptions of Twitter inside the classroom and of WhatsApp outside the classroom throughout a 12-week semester. The study draws on the three broad phases of Fullan's change process (Fullan, 2001, 2007, 2016) for its underpinning theoretical framework and utilizes agency theory (van Lier, 2004, 2008, 2010) as an analytical tool for developing a deep understanding of the ways the innovative use of a VSN can aid students in and outside the classroom by allowing them to practice and collaborate in English learning.

The study utilizes a mixed methods approach for data collection, divided into two stages; one designed to gather background information and another for a longitudinal study. The data collection instruments employed for the background stage included a questionnaire, interviews, and classroom scenarios, to gather data from 93 English language teacher trainees and 84 Preparatory Year Program (PYP) students from three different colleges at Qassim University (QU) in Saudi Arabia. The data collection instruments for the longitudinal study stage, which consisted of initial and post-project interviews, focus group participation, research log observations in and outside the classroom, and a post-project questionnaire, were employed to gather data from 25 PYP students throughout the 12-week semester.

The study results revealed that VSN in the Saudi EFL context is divided into two types, private- and public-based, and that participants' use and activity in each type varies depending on the platform affordances. It also suggests that, while students may have a positive attitude toward the use of a VSN in their daily lives, contextual constraints could mean that classroom use may fail to be sustained over a relatively long period of time. Within the study, although Twitter's affordances in terms of anonymity and perceived newness initially motivated the students to exercise their agency in English learning, their anxiety, the teacher's role, and the university infrastructure all played a crucial role in the

failure of Twitter's use to be sustained inside the classroom beyond the ninth week. However, WhatsApp's implementation exhibited its sustainability by continuing even after the study ended and until the end of the semester. WhatsApp allowed the students to collaborate, practice what they were learning, develop autonomy, and transit from being passive to active learners, not only in English but also in other subjects.

Finally, this thesis concludes by illustrating the value of interpreting the complex and dynamic nature of the innovation's implementation process using agency theory from an ecological perspective. It also recommends ways in which teachers could implement VSN in the language classroom.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mother Madawi and my father Hamad who kept on encouraging me and praying for me every day.

To my beloved wife Afnan for taking care of me, encouraging me and for being patient with this long PhD journey.

To my daughters Diyala and Yara who missed a lot of attention from me because of my studies.

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